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OFFICE OF THE PLEBISCITE COMMISSIONER

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Saipan, Mariana Islands 96950

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Plebiscite Commissioner

Post Office Box 185
Capitol Hill Rural Branch

June 22, 1975
~~June 19, 1975~~

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The President
United States of America
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

It has been a fascinating and intense task to serve as your personal representative in administering the June 17 plebiscite in the Northern Mariana Islands. I have enjoyed every minute.

In your letter to me of April 11 you told me I would be "responsible for assuring that the plebiscite is conducted objectively, impartially, and in a manner which will guarantee that the people of the Northern Mariana Islands are able to exercise freely their right to determine their future political status".

Thus my role throughout was to remain entirely neutral from the issues of the plebiscite but to work actively to support and ensure a free political process.

With the aid of an exceptionally able Executive Director, N. Neiman Craley, Jr., a former member of the House of Representatives from Pennsylvania, who has had nearly a decade of experience in Micronesia, I did the following things:

- . Established with all groups in the Northern Marianas my intention to remain neutral;
- . Set up an Advisory Committee representing the major entities, for and against the Covenant, in the Marianas;
- . Appointed a Voter Registration Board to carry out the difficult task of creating an entirely new registration list;
- . Issued guidelines for unhampered and equitable use of radio and television by the campaigners;
- . Published the essential texts and explanatory material relative to the plebiscite in English, Chamorro, and Carolinian, whenever possible;

. Established and enforced regulations for the actual voting and appointed poll workers and election judges representing pro- and anti-Covenant groups in equal numbers;

. Made sure the votes were accurately counted and tabulated, also under the surveillance of representatives of both sides.

Our most challenging task was to produce the entirely new list of registered voters. You will appreciate that most such lists are cumulative over years. Ours had to be ad hoc. In a few weeks we registered 5,344 persons, which compares with an estimated total of 5,880 possible eligible persons. We registered an additional 125 absentee individuals. Challenges as permitted by the Secretarial Order were presented to the Voter Registration Board and subsequently to the Special Plebiscite Appellate Court, and 90 names were removed from the list.

Thus a total of 5,379 persons were registered and able to vote, which is 91.5 percent of possible eligibles. (I invite comparison with any voting precincts in the United States.) Of these registered persons 4,999 cast valid ballots either in person or absentee, which is 92.9 percent. I am sure you will agree that these are remarkable percentages, proving the intense interest of the Marianas people in the historic issue to be decided and the efficacy of the processes of registration, campaigning, and voting.

Finally, as of course you know, 3,939 persons voted in favor of the Covenant of Commonwealth, or 78.8 percent, and 1,060 voted against. The results evidence the ardor of the Northern Marianas people in their desire for political union with the United States.

I believe a perfectly free election was held. It may interest you, as an old hand at the political process, that at the 18 voting places on Plebiscite Day we recorded only 8 cases of uncertain registration and of these 4 were finally able to vote and 4 could not.

The campaigning was lively but orderly. There was no violence. Generally, a very good spirit prevailed throughout.

We had the great benefit of a visiting mission from the United Nations Trusteeship Council. It consisted of James Murray, United Kingdom, Chairman; John Meltrish, Australia; Bertrand De Lataillade, France. They conferred extensively with me, discussed matters with various Marianas political leaders and individuals, observed the campaign activities and political education materials, and kept a sharp eye on voting procedures and counting of the ballots.

There are divisions in the Northern Marianas based on ancient ethnic differences. My staff and I tried very hard not to polarize or intensify

these differences, for the future of society and government here depends in no small measure on reducing majority-minority discriminations and fears.

The campaign and the voting inevitably reflected these differences but we did all we could to soften them.

I have greatly appreciated and enjoyed the privilege of serving as Plebiscite Commissioner. Not many other Americans have had such an opportunity and I am deeply grateful to you and to the Secretary of Commerce Rogers C. B. Morton, who was Secretary of the Interior at the time of my appointment. I have been provided assistance when I asked for it from High Commissioner Johnston, various elements of the Trust Territory Government, and the Marianas District Administration. When it became apparent that we might have problems requiring the aid of an attorney - as indeed proved to be the case - the genuine independence of my function was supported by the able services of John C. Craft, Esq., of Kansas City, Missouri. Most of all, however, I have benefitted from the assistance of Mr. Craley, whom I referred to earlier. He was detached from his function as Special Assistant for Legislative Affairs to the High Commissioner to serve me as Executive Director of the Plebiscite. His long experience, knowledge, and sensitivity toward the peoples of the Northern Marianas were of indispensable value.

Again, thanks for a most gratifying opportunity.

Respectfully yours,

Erwin D. Canham

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